Antebellum Reform: An Overview

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Introduction

“Second Great Awakening”; “Industrial Revolution”; “Manifest Destiny”; “antebellum reform.” American history teachers and students encounter these phrases on their way from the “American Revolution” to the “Civil War”—two other well-used names for events and concepts in the history of the United States. Sometimes these phrases become so comfortable or familiar that they seem self-evident or they take on an indistinct cast, which blurs their meaning.

Take the Second Great Awakening, for example, which for some students in my college American history survey is the “Second great awakening,” a nebulous word they know is important and should memorize but are unclear as to its meaning and importance. A simplified definition is a period of widespread religious change evidenced by revival meetings and the belief that individuals are responsible for their own morality and improving that of others in their communities. But the individual words that make up such phrases beg additional consideration. In the case of the Second Great Awakening: What about it makes it second? Why was it “great”—or widespread? Why did people require “awakening”? Re-inserting the spaces between the words in the conceptual phrase in this way aids students (and their educators) in their efforts to decode, analyze, and respond to questions about the historical label. In this essay, I will take apart “Antebellum reform” and reconstitute it as “antebellum reform” by considering how scholars have conceptualized this crucial component of the American past.

Ways of Viewing the Past

“Antebellum reform” obscures two key features: time and action. These are “antebellum,” meaning before the war, and “reform,” meaning action taken to improve a condition or institution understood by an individual or group to be flawed or unjust. These two words raise several questions for clarification: When is the “antebellum” period? What distinguishes it from other periods of American history? Who advocated reform? What conditions or institutions required reform? Why did these need reform? How did reformers attempt to make changes, and were they successful?

Before offering some answers to these questions, I want to return to the idioms with which I began. It is not coincidental that I selected the phrases Second Great Awakening, Industrial Revolution, and Manifest Destiny for my analysis of Antebellum Reform. They correspond to the three main ways scholars have characterized the cause and nature of antebellum reform in the past 30 years—the Second Great Awakening fostering not only religious revivals but also secular activism to improve the morals and lives of antebellum Americans; the Industrial
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(or Market) Revolution effecting monumental changes in the economy locally, regionally, and nationally; and Manifest Destiny fueling the expansion across the continent and its political consequences. Although scholars recognize that these political, economic, and socio-cultural processes were inextricably linked, most give more weight to one of these over the others to explain why antebellum reform occurred when, where, and how it did. Often, this emphasis can be ascribed to the category of analysis the historian employs; race, gender, class, and region serve as the prisms through which historians view the antebellum past.

Defining the Period

Historians usually define the antebellum years as 1815–1860—from the successful conclusion of the War of 1812 through the onset of the Civil War. Traditionally historians have demarcated historical eras by wars because these armed conflicts usually indicate a significant shift in or challenge to political power or national identity. This is the case for the antebellum period because the War of 1812 solidified America’s independence from Britain and contributed to an increased sense of nationhood; 45 years later, the American Civil War nearly ruptured that fragile union. Between these conflicts, the country doubled its size through forced Indian removal and wars on its southwestern border, even as it struggled to diffuse growing sectional anxiety over how those lands would be governed. Determining the best balance between federal and state power consistently proved a significant challenge in the face of tariffs, nullification, Indian sovereignty, and slavery; universal white male suffrage and the rise and demise of political parties came to characterize the young nation’s experiment with democracy.

Historians also track the social and cultural changes within this 45-year period, including religious revivals and the clergy’s decreasing authority during the Second Great Awakening, as well as the proliferation of secular reform movements. From both revivals and reform, many middle-class women in particular acquired a new sense of purpose as their responsibilities transitioned from home production to social reproduction. They gained experience in organizing, running, and leading associations to “provide bibles and tracts, end drunkenness, abolish slavery, build orphan asylums and training schools, improve the moral and physical condition of prostitutes, establish utopian communities, transform Americans’ practices of eating, healing, dressing, and educating, and raise women’s status.”1 While some of these efforts involved self-reform, many were directed at the growing working, especially immigrant, class. As gradual emancipation of slavery in states like New York and
New Jersey went into effect, the northern free black population grew in numbers. However, free blacks also faced the loss of civil and political rights in many northern states. Despite efforts to marginalize them politically and economically, reform-minded blacks established associations to ameliorate poverty and provide education in their communities, and spoke publicly against slavery and gave assistance to runaway slaves on their way to Canada.

**Weighing Causes: The Market Revolution**

Although historians generally agree that the changes described above occurred, they disagree on either the relative importance of those changes to shaping antebellum America or the motivations of the reformers who both experienced and influenced those changes. Much of the debate over these issues was provoked by Charles Sellers’s *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (1991). Sellers views capitalism as a hegemonic force that shaped America’s political economy by involving state and local governments in market development as sponsors of commercial infrastructure by funding the building of roads, bridges, and canals as well as chartering banks and corporations. It also drove the rise and fall of political parties. Federalists, National Republicans, and Whigs championed not only individual entrepreneurship but also an activist state overseeing tariffs and taxes through government intervention in state and federal economies.

More suspicious of state involvement in these economies, Democratic Republicans and eventually Jacksonian Democrats espoused limited government so it would not become a tool of wealthy merchants, manufacturers, and bankers. Even as government leaders wrestled with the political consequences of the market revolution, the Protestant clergy of the Northeast split over how to respond to it and its socioeconomic consequences of rapid urbanization, increased immigration, single-minded pursuit of gold rather than God, and perceived immorality within the increasing ranks of impoverished wage laborers. Unitarian rationality among the wealthy, along with evangelical, democratic revivals in agrarian areas in the East and new settlements of the West, inspired citizens and established a multitude of reform organizations. It is at this point in the narrative of the market revolution, the rise of political parties, the Second Great Awakening, and the origins of antebellum reform that historians diverge.

According to Sellers, reform organizations financed and headed by the new middle class attempted to solve all human problems, establishing a “Benevolent Empire.” By the 1830s, economically successful middle-class men faced two profound challenges in their personal and public lives. First, their wives flocked to evangelical revivals and ministers, such as Charles Grandison Finney, who empowered the women to reform themselves, their children, their husbands, and a society polluted by excessive greed and immorality by establishing voluntary associations. Second, middle-class men met with social disorder fomented by wage laborers—be they immigrant, Catholic, and/or transient—who no longer adhered to the patriarchal discipline that had characterized the pre-market economy.

To ameliorate their anxiety about unrepentant and undisciplined laborers, Sellers argues, the middle classes expected ministers and leaders in law, medicine, education, business, and
intellectualism to instruct members of all socioeconomic classes “in a pansectarian middle-class culture of effortful ‘character’ and self-improvement.” Although much of the working class withstood the reform initiatives intended to convince them to abide by middle-class values, the financial Panic of 1837 and its economic fallout caused many to adopt middle-class disciplines, although others intentionally scorned reform and instead pursued a culture based on competition, camaraderie, and boisterous entertainment. In sum, Sellers presents antebellum reform efforts as tools of the middle class to impose capitalism and morality on a freewheeling laboring class and establish bourgeois hegemony.

In the 15 years since its publication, The Market Revolution has been a catalyst for the continued study of the effects of the market revolution on antebellum America. To name just two, in 1997 an edited collection of essays, The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880 testifies to the depth and breadth of influence of Sellers’s book. Although the volume contains essays that criticize parts of Sellers’s analysis or attempt to move beyond it, it does not seriously challenge that analysis. A more recent edited volume, Cultural Change and the Market Revolution in America, 1789–1860 (2005), contains essays that examine the “cultural dimensions, ramifications, and reactions to market expansion,” including a thought-provoking essay by Patrick Rael. He points out the irony of the market revolution as the catalyst for the expansion of slavery as well as the organized, and sometimes competing, efforts to end slavery through radical abolition, political antislavery, and black protest thought. Rael notes that northern African American leaders adopted reform as the vehicle for their activism in the 1830s, explaining that even after “many black activists declared their independence from radical abolitionism, but the flavor of reform never left the movement, and even the most militant black activists of the 1850s never stopped calling for moral reformation,” especially when articulating their strategy of individual uplift to counteract racial prejudice.

The Role of Gender

Sellers was not the first historian to attempt to analyze antebellum America and the tremendous changes that took place over the course of the era. More than a decade before The Market Revolution, two community studies situated in the Erie Canal corridor of upstate New York examined the connections between the Second Great Awakening, the rise of a middle class, and reform. In A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837 (1978), Paul E. Johnson characterizes middle-class social reforms as means of social control by middle-class capitalists over their employees. Specifically, “newly evangelized Christian employers, recognizing the financial benefits that would accrue from a workshop of orderly and sober employees, dispensed or withheld patronage and jobs on the basis of workers’ willingness to forgo drink, to behave industriously, and to embrace the revivalists’ brand of evangelical Protestantism.”

Johnson’s tale of social reform based on class conflict overlooks gender as a factor in both class conflict and social reform, whereas Mary P. Ryan places women, if not gender, at the center of her study Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York,
Ryan traces the development of the middle-class family with women's and young men's participation in voluntary associations and religious reforms as a step toward the creation of the Victorian middle-class family.

Indeed, women's involvement in voluntary associations outside of the home signified middle-class status because it meant their families did not require their productive labor. As Cindy S. Aron explains, “Over the course of the antebellum period…such women established and reaffirmed their middle-class identity as they differentiated themselves from the less-fortunate women who were often objects of their ministering and charity.”

Laura F. Edwards, encapsulating scholars' findings regarding women and antebellum reform in the past 25 years, points out that reformers, visiting the homes of poor women in cities, “gave advice about motherhood and housekeeping, and distributed material aid to those deemed worthy and deserving,” and “even confronted the sensitive issue of prostitution, linking it to women's economic marginality and their exploitation by men.”

In *Women in Antebellum Reform* (2000), Lori D. Ginzberg has crafted the most succinct yet comprehensive explanation of women and reform. She begins with the origins of reform, reminding readers, “Reform movements do not spring up from nowhere nor do they emerge simultaneously with a particular social problem.” Like Sellers, Ginzberg asserts that the economic changes in the first half of the nineteenth century sparked anxiety and fear; however, she distances herself from Sellers's cynical stance toward middle-class reform, discussing how reform movements represent optimism about the potential for social change.

For many women, this meant that they must protect and improve their homes and families by promoting reform beyond the walls of their homes. How they went about this duty varied considerably. Ginzberg points out that more conservative charity work attracted members of the upper classes; more radical activities, including abolitionism, drew women and men from lower social groups. Working-class reformers were less integral to such movements.

Although divided by class, religious affiliation, and marital status, these reformers emphasized women's unique—in their minds—capacity to aid others, which they translated into moral superiority over men. However, this claim of moral superiority hampered attempts to improve women's legal, political, and economic position because they would call into question the “respectability” of women reformers. To avoid this, most of these women operated “within a framework that accepted a deeply gendered, Protestant mandate to better their society.”

Bruce Dorsey, in his *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (2002), also emphasizes the gendered nature of reform. Like Ginzberg, he offers a variation on Sellers's “market revolution” thesis. Dorsey identifies “the end of bound labor”—indentured servitude and northern slavery—“the rise of a market-driven and wage-labor economy, and conflicts over the nature of the citizenry” as “the backdrop for nearly all the reform movements that appeared in the North before the Civil War.” In doing so, he makes not only gender and class but also race and nationalism central to his analysis. Dorsey argues
that male and female reformers experienced their lives as gendered beings in a cultural milieu in which they also “invoked concepts and symbols of the masculine and the feminine to fashion and advance their reform agendas.” For example, the concepts of independence and dependence held gendered meanings, the former ascribed to men and the latter to women. Dorsey’s nuanced reading of gender as a central feature of reformers’ experiences, assumptions, and actions adds another layer to the historical literature on antebellum reform.

Religion and the Second Great Awakening

A different vein of the historiography of antebellum reform examines its religious components, especially its roots in the Second Great Awakening. Catherine Brekus, in her overview of religious history in the nineteenth century, explains that those scholars who have focused on religious change have differed over whether religious revivals “were orderly, rational, and marked by ‘very few extravagances’” or “were anti-intellectual, emotional, and even crude at times.” Regardless of interpretation, she avers, religious scholars agree that revivals were “a crucial part of American nation-building, [as] a religious response to the political upheavals of the early national period.” T. Gregory Garvey takes this a step further in his *Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America* (2006). He asserts that divisions between the more orthodox clergy and liberal evangelicals not only led to a liberalization and democratization of public discourse about theology but also to the creation of “a culture of reform through which people debated moral and ethical questions” outside of the courtroom, the market, and the political podium. This “culture of public debate,” Garvey argues, “has not only enabled Americans continually to mediate deep divisions in the society but also profoundly influenced their understanding of equality and citizenship.”

More directly concerned with the motivations of reformers, religious historians continue to debate whether the market revolution and the materialism it generated or a “religious vision in its own right (not as the reflexive vehicle for articulating ‘underlying’ material concerns)” stimulated religious reformers. In *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (1994), Robert H. Abzug recognizes the importance of the market revolution but argues that a “religious vision” was promulgated by “religious virtuosos” who tried to reconcile their beliefs in God’s intentions for America with the daily realities of life in antebellum America. These religious virtuosos explored and experimented with a wide array of social reforms as ways to accomplish this reconciliation – environmentalism, temperance, body reforms, transcendentalism, social utopias, and abolition, among others. However, these reform movements proved transitory or, in the case of abolition, were adopted by reformers with political rather than religious vision.

Conclusion

With roots in religious revivalism and dramatic socioeconomic change, antebellum reform touched on the full spectrum of nineteenth-century Americans’ lives: personal reforms like diet and dress; institutional reforms for schools, prisons, and asylums; moral reforms
to counteract prostitution, drunkenness, and poverty; cultural reforms like religious revivals and protest thought; and reforms that moved into the realm of politics like abolition and women's rights. After this cursory overview of recent scholarship, hopefully “Antebellum reform” has been replaced with “Antebellum Reform”—a complicated, contested, and yet crucial part of nineteenth-century history.

Notes

7. Ibid.
18. Editor's note: Sean Wilentz’s new book, *Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005), can also help provide an overview of this period, while additional useful sources include the classic works by Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District*: 11